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AUTHOR Brown, Stephen G.
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ABSTRACT

The adversarial forces of governmental censorship, freedom of expression, and capitalistic appropriation are engaged in an acrimonious debate over "Gangsta' Rap" that is being played out in the public spaces of popular culture. However, as a literacy of lived experience, Gangsta' Rap warrants critical investigation. Many postmodern theorists have articulated the limitations of literacy as it has been traditionally practiced in the composition classroom. They speak, as Patricia Bizzell does, of the growing gap between the classroom and the community of the students, between their home dialects and standard English. A rap-oriented radical pedagogy seeks first of all to reconstitute as subjects those who have been treated as objects. Non-school and academic literacies are thus not viewed as incompatible discourses at the extremes of a binary opposition, but as the mutually nourishing elements of a continuum in which traffic flows both ways between the public and the private sector. Specific classroom experiences would include: (1) asking students to take a position on some of the public debates over Gangsta' rap; (2) asking students to collect Gangsta' Rap lyrics for distribution to the class as a stimulus for discussion; and (3) asking students to write their own rap lyrics. Rap lyrics can also be an effect domain from which to mount a critical investigation of the mainstream culture. (Contains 27 references.) (TB)

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Unwrapping Rap: A Literacy of Lived Experience

Stephen G. Brown
Department of English, CPR 358
University of South Florida
4202 E. Fowler Avenue
Tampa, FL 33620-5550
(813) 978-1881

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Unwrapping Rap: A Literacy of Lived Experience

"In this man world you got tuh take yuh mouth and make a gun."

--Paule Marshall

Gangsta' Rap is a highly politicized terrain where many issues are being contested. The adversarial forces of governmental censorship, freedom of expression, and capitalistic appropriation are engaged in an acrimonious debate over Gangsta' Rap that is being played out in the public spaces of popular culture. One of the sites of this contestation is Congress, where the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice recently conducted hearings into the inflammatory content of Gangsta' Rap lyrics in an effort to determine, as Senator Carol Moseley-Braun states, "what effect if any do brutally violent, vulgar, and sexist music lyrics have on our nation's children, and what, if anything, are we--in Congress, in the industry, and in society--prepared to do about it" (1). Her concerns are shared by Senator Herb Kohl: "Our topic for today is 'Gangster Rap'--and other popular music that is violent, racist, anti-semitic, sexually graphic or demeaning toward women" (1). Deploying the rhetoric of righteous indignation, Kohl asserts that these rappers "ought to be ashamed of what they are teaching our children" (1).

Kohl's rhetoric, however, pales in comparison with that of Dr. C. Delores Tucker, Chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women, who characterizes Gangsta' Rap as "pornographic smut" and a "cultural plague," while asserting that "THE RECORD INDUSTRY IS OUT OF CONTROL!" (2-3):

> This pornographic smut being sold to our children coerces, influences, encourages and motivates our youth to commit violent behavior, use drugs and abuse women through demeaning sex acts. (3)

Though it may not be politically correct, I would like to offer a different, if somewhat heretical, perspective on Gangsta' Rap, while arguing for its inclusion in classroom praxis on the grounds that the contents of these "texts"--or (con)texts if you will--comprise a useful vehicle for achieving critical literacy. Moreover, such an approach to composition instruction is consistent not only with postmodern sensibilities, but with the aims of radical pedagogy.

The debate over Gangsta' Rap is a divisive one, positioning black against black, white against black, male against female, and the power elite against the marginalized urban underclass. The debate is also a multifaceted one, where many issues have been put in play: Gangsta' Rap's subversive, resistant, reformist stance versus its misogynist, materialist, racist tendencies; censorship versus freedom of expression, responsibilities versus rights; the advantages and disadvantages of massification versus marginalization. The debate has also raised a number of

significant questions: is nihilism a legitimate means of empowerment; is Gangsta' Rap a sociopathic discourse of violence or a literacy of lived experience; are Gansta' Rappers at the leading edge of the struggle against racial, economic, and political oppression or are they merely materialistic opportunists; is the crime rate among juveniles increasing or decreasing as a consequence of Gangsta' Rap; does the music glorify a cult of violence or merely reflect the ghettoized terrain that sired it; is the message of its lyrics anti-educational, or can these lyrics be approached as texts, as vehicles to foster critical literacy, agency, and radical subject position; and finally, does Gangsta' Rap comprise what bell hooks defines as a common ground--"a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur" (31).

The purpose of this paper is not to proffer answers to all of these questions, but to address the critical neglect, the scholarly absence surrounding the debate over Gangsta' Rap, in the hope of narrowing the abyss between the classroom and the community, the academy and the ghetto, the word and the world. Though Gangsta' Rap has received the close scrutiny of Senators, it has been virtually overlooked by scholars, with a few noteworthy exceptions such as Houston A. Baker and bell hooks. Yet even they confine their scholarship to Rap music in general--a broad, hybridized, billion-dollar industry of which Gangsta' Rap is a sub-genre. Further, no scholars to my knowledge have analyzed Gangsta' Rap's relevancy to the contemporary composition

classroom, and the ongoing debate about literacy. The primary focus of this paper, consequently, is pedagogical: it is concerned with the formulation of a radical pedagogy grounded in Rap in general, and Gangsta' Rap in particular, with positing both a theoretical rationale and a pragmatic framework for such a project.

As a literacy of lived experience, Gangsta' Rap warrants critical investigation. The lyrics of these Lords of Misrule are texts that function as vehicles, as an underground subway if you will, for postmodern sensibilities, resistance struggle, critical literacy, radical black subjectivity, and coalition politics. Gangsta' Rap is an extremely conflicted ground where issues of race, class, and gender intersect, and as such it is uniquely situated for critical analysis, rife with potential for the classroom, with much to offer the theorist as well as the practitioner. These texts offer, as well, the hope of situating scholarship in the ghettoized terrain of urban America, of reversing the continental drift that is widening the gap between the critical word and the conflicted world.

The Word or the World?

Instead of responding directly to the charges aimed at Gangsta' Rap by its powerful opponents, I would like to respond by offering a theoretical rationale for its inclusion in the composition classroom, for ultimately such a project is consistent with many of the aims, and much of the focus, of

postmodern theory in general, and critical literacy in particular. Gangsta' Rap constitutes a useful medium for fostering critical literacy--one which utilizes the lived experience of students to evolve a sense of agency and subject position for large numbers of individuals who have had none. The need for such a radical pedagogy is evidenced by the shortcomings that inhere in transactional and expressivist approaches to composition praxis. I would like to begin, therefore, by briefly noting the inadequacies and injustices of pedagogies grounded in functional and cultural literacy, and proceed from there to developing a rationale for a rap-oriented critical literacy that is consistent with the postmodern sensibility.

Many postmodern theorists have articulated the limitations of literacy as it has been traditionally practiced in the composition classroom. They speak, as Patricia Bizzell does, of the growing gap between the classroom and the community of the students, between their home dialects and Standard English (294). They speak, as Robert Pattison does, of the "split between formal and informal discourse, between the language of power and the language of the streets" (84). These traditional, transactional classroom pedagogies perpetuate the homogeneous discourse practices of the dominant culture, while repressing the "informal oral literacy we see growing up around us," "a popular literacy keyed to the spoken language of the people"--in the process denying many access and participation in a full literacy (85,201). Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux also call into

question the aims and validity of a literacy grounded in "the ideology of established authority," arguing that such a pedagogy "maintains an ominous ideological silence . . . regarding the validity and importance of the experience of women, Blacks, and other groups excluded from the narrative of mainstream history and culture" (185). In Critical Literacy, Colin Lankshear and Peter McLaren also interrogate the legitimacy of an educational discourse predicated on cultural literacy for it "implies the denial of cultural difference as educationally valid and legitimate" (18). Similarly, Houston A. Baker observes that the "type of literacy guaranteed by the academy today is still not calculated to provide anything approaching an adequate definition of black life in America" (130-31). Baker's misgivings are shared by Giroux and McLaren, who assert that, for marginalized students, schools have traditionally been "places of dead time, holding centers that have little or nothing to do with either their lives or their dreams." They conclude that "reversing this experience . . . must be a central issue in reconstructing a new educational policy"--and, I would add, for inventing a new radical pedagogy (xxiv).

Is Gangsta' Rap to become just another casualty in this cultural silencing, sentenced to the illegitimate margins of society, as Lankshear and McLaren contend, along with the rest of "their lived meanings . . . their representations of their lives, conditions, and struggles" (18)? Are the voices on the margins of our society destined to become as muted as those in

the marshes of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring? Moreover, this silencing has disturbing implications for the rising drop-out rates of marginalized students. As Lankshear and McLaren observe, "withdrawal from education and public life has much to do with being silenced and forced to engage in activities and modes of being that are profoundly alien" (19). It is reductive and unfair to blame Gangsta' Rappers, as Spike Lee does, for the rising drop out rate among urban African-Americans, when other factors, such as deculturation and exclusion from the marketplace are equally to blame, as Lankshear and McLaren affirm: "There is good reason for schooling having become strongly disvalued by those who have long experienced it as a route to inevitable failure and disadvantage" (19). If the powerful critics of Gangsta' Rap really want to reverse the rising drop-out rate, then perhaps they should cease scapegoating rappers for the failures of the schools and look to the real causes for student disenchantment: deculturation and economic exclusion.

Lankshear and McLaren's view receives strong endorsement from John U. Ogbu, who cites the deculturation of the schooling experience as well as the failure of society at large to fulfill the promise of economic rewards and democratic participation promised to students. The marketplace no longer offers proof of the adage that an education is the key to success, no longer rewards students' faith in that adage. As the drop-out rate evinces, this crisis in faith among students in general, and among students of color in particular, is the real crisis schools

are facing. What can we do? How can we restore the faith of marginalized students in education?

The World as Word

The answer lies in the willingness of schools to institute radical reforms. If educators cannot do anything about the fluctuations of the marketplace, they can do something about the deculturation experienced by marginalized students by making classroom praxis relevant to their lived experiences. Many post-modern theorists have argued recently for just such a radical reconceptualizing of pedagogical practice--one which would efface the disjunction between the word and the world, the classroom and the community; one which conceives of literacy not as the mastering of culturally alien skills and texts, but as the "ability to participate fully in a set of intellectual and social practices"--as Jay L. Robinson states, a literacy which establishes a living dialectic between the word and the world (35).

Such a radical approach to literacy and its classroom practices has received strong support from many postmodern theorists, whose advocacy has significant implications for a radical pedagogy foregrounded in Gangsta' Rap. Ira Shor, for example notes the significance of Shirley Bryce Heath's pioneering work Ways With Words, which "suggested reaching out into everyday life to build on the existing literacy of any school population" (15). Heath cites some of the perils for a

pedagogy that ignores the lived realities of the student: "Classroom environments that do not value the home culture of the student lead to decreased motivation and poor academic performance" (270-72). Shor similarly favors a "situated pedagogy," one which asks

> teachers to situate learning in the students' cultures--their literacy, their themes . . . their aspirations, their daily lives. The goal is to integrate experiential materials with conceptual methods and academic subjects. (24)

In "Reading Rock' n' Roll in the Classroom: A Critical Pedagogy," David Shumway makes a strong case for using rock lyrics as textual vehicles to critical literacy. Gangsta' Rap lyrics, because they possess the potential for mitigating deculturation and for achieving critical literacy in the classroom, similarly warrant inclusion in composition pedagogy. These songs comprise alternative texts hewed from the lived experience of many, if not most, urban students, and as such they merit the critical gaze of scholars. What Pattison says of rock lyrics is equally true of rap lyrics, for they "are fed by the desire of the people at large for a literacy that credits the power of language to capture and express the fullness of life" (203). Using "subjective" materials as texts has the potential to re-engage the interest of marginalized students by connecting their world to the word.

The trend to transform the classroom into a politicized terrain grounded in an interrogation of injustice and aimed at radical social reform is founded on the pedagogical principles of Paulo Freire. Moreover, as Victor Villanueva observes in "Considerations for American Freireistas," Freire's pedagogy "begins with the private, lived experience" of the learner in an effort to develop a measure of critical consciousness in them (249). If one defines Gangsta' Rap as a literacy of lived experience, then the implications of a Freirean approach to pedagogy are significant. Giroux and Mclaren also note the relevance of Freirean theory to postmodern radical pedagogy, with its emphasis on "readings of lived realities in peripheral societies and attempts to address those realities, engaging them in a dialectic with what they perceived as home" (xiii). For a radical pedagogy rooted in Gangsta' Rap, the statement has important implications: first, it is difficult to conceive of a more "peripheral society" than the ghettoized urban terrain of the rapper; second, few texts articulate their "lived realities" as powerfully as rap lyrics do. Giroux and McLaren provide further justification for such a radical approach to pedagogy when they affirm that "a curriculum policy must be set forth that argues for the importance of drawing upon the cultural resources that students bring to schools as a basis for developing new skills and engaging existing knowledge claims" (xxiv). The lived experiences of students thus become the de facto texts for

achieving critical literacy, as noted by the authors of Critical Pedagogy:

> This concept suggests advocating . . . modes of pedagogy that both confirm and critically engage the knowledge and experience through which students give meaning to their lives. In effect it suggests taking seriously, as a crucial aspect of learning, the experiences of students mediated by their own histories, languages, and traditions. (xxiv)

In Blues, Ideology, and African-American Literature, Houston Baker also writes of the need to "reinvent" the relationship between the word and the world, developing the relevance of vernacular to pedagogy (31). Building upon Baker's argument, Thomas Fox asserts that "composition teachers need to see these texts as forming the 'social ground' from which African American students write"--a statement with obvious relevance for using rap lyrics as texts (300). Fox notes the importance of the social milieu for fostering student literacy, for laying the groundwork, as it were, upon which to construct a critical literacy. Viewed in this context, "the ongoing annoying questions of whether or not to teach Standard English withers in its insignificance. If recent literary theory has taught us anything, it is that literacy . . . is defined by the social relations in which it occurs" (301). Lankshear and McLaren similarly advocate a pedagogy that can "take the voices and experiences of the Other as material for educational work" (18).

Rap can be posited as just one strand in the complex web of cultural meanings, which Lankshear and McLaren characterize as "lived practices and representations, as deep as life itself because they are life. They are the outcomes of struggle, mediation, resolution, and creation" (20). Ogbu also sheds light on the origins of marginalized expressive strategies, such as Gangsta' Rap, noting that they are steeped in the power relations of the dominant culture and the excluded Other, and that they arise as "an adaptation to the limited opportunity historically open to them" and are "an expressive response . . . that the minorities have developed to cope with their subordinate relationship with the dominant group" (151).

Ferdman and Weber echo the efficacy of a pedagogical approach that privileges the lived experience of students: "The best way to learn is by building on each child's own culture, language, and background" (6). Such a move would mitigate the deculturation experienced by many marginalized students, which Ogbu cites as one of the main factors for the sky-rocketing drop-out rates. Viewed in this context, Gangsta' Rap texts comprise a potentially effective vehicle for realizing the goals of radical pedagogy--one of which is to "confront those institutions, processes, and ideologies that prevent them from naming the world," as Lankshear and McLaren affirm (42). Such confrontation is absolutely essential in a Freirean theory, if these marginalized groups are ever to "reclaim their right to live

humanely" (42). The conflicted, ghettoized terrain of which they speak is thus "the ultimate text to be read and written" (43).

Foregrounding pedagogy in an examination of these illegitimate texts would aid students in their quest "to read and write--to understand and name--the world itself" because these texts comprise a fertile ground where the word and the world intersect (43). Additionally, these contested texts would enable students "to make connections between their own lived conditions . . . and the making of reality" (43). As Lankshear and McLaren conclude, "these generative words provide the building blocks for learning to read and write" (44). Further, they "reinforce the pedagogical assumption that learning should always be linked as closely and directly as possible to the lived experience and immediate reality of learners" (46). Thus, to be meaningful to the marginalized, pedagogy must be grounded in "direct, serious, sociologically informed engagement with the lived cultures and accumulated cultural experience of marginal groups of learners" (47).

As a species of idiomatic discourse, or a vernacular grounded in "the vocabulary universe" of the student, Gangsta' Rap warrants inclusion in a radical pedagogy. Miriam Camita, for example, makes a strong case for including "vernacular writing" in the composition classroom because it is "associated with domestic, community, and local contexts," and because it is "non-canonical" and, as such, resembles other "modern texts, especially highly innovative ones, and such culturally exotic

works as oral or tribal, popular, and ethnic literature," as well as "community-based, localized forms of expression" (262). As discourse, Rap has the potential to effect all of these goals, to engage the student's personality in the learning process, solidify a sense of self, while generating a sense of commonality among marginalized students. Using Rap lyrics as texts would be consistent with a pedagogy that approaches literacy as conversation, "just so long as that great conversation is understood to include not only the voices of the disciplinary scholars, but the voices of ordinary people . . . writing or speaking the scripts of their lives" (Robinson and Stock 165).

As a form of talk, Rap has important implications for writing, as noted by the authors of "Literacy as Conversation," who cite the work of James Boyd White to support their claims about "the relation of talk to writing . . . of the literate acts of composing and comprehending to similar acts in spoken language" (170). Language in general, and street vernacular in particular, offers students a means to literacy. The rapper is not only engaged in naming his or her world, but in naming it according to certain conventions peculiar to the genre--a practice with obvious relevance to the composing processes of the classroom. For the practitioner who is searching for a means of using spoken contexts as texts to enrich or even supplant canonical texts, rap lyrics comprise a ready vehicle.

Support for using Rap lyrics in the composition class can be found in a number of compositionists, who argue for the

centrality of Rap texts. Patricia Bizzell is another who advocates the utilization of "home dialects" for achieving literacy and for mitigating against the deculturation that prompts so many students to become disenchanted with schooling. As Bizzell observes, "defenders of home dialects say that forcing students to abandon dialects, even if only occasionally or temporarily, presents such a barrier that students will learn very little while concentrating on the language problem" (295). As a species of home dialect, Rap possesses the potential to revitalize the learning process for such marginalized students. Using home(boy) idioms to effect literacy is also consistent with the views of Mina Shaughnessy, who argues in Errors and Expectations that writing should tap into students' ways "of thinking and talking about the world" (292).

In "The Interaction of Public and Private Literacies," Richard Courage likewise affirms that non-school literacy should be appropriated as a type of text in itself, that students' lived experience should not be jettisoned in the effort to assimilate them into the dominant culture (485). The spontaneous, uncritical literacy of home idioms can be used as a springboard for achieving a more critical, academic literacy; and indeed such a symbiotic relationship between the literacies of community and classroom is consistent with the theories of Lev Vygotsky, who asserts in Thought and Language that the spontaneous, uncritical thoughts of the child are eventually absorbed into the more critical, scientific, and abstract thoughts of the adult as part

of the cognitive developmental process--deploying the metaphor of a gyre to depict the upward momentum of the former and the downward movement of the latter, their developmental commingling occurring in a "zone of proximal development" (187).

Why has classroom experience always devalued the spontaneous and uncritical idiom of the world, and privileged the scientific and critical discourse of the academic word? For by severing the world from the word, the spontaneous from the scientific, the uncritical from the critical it disrupts, if not inhibits, the learner's developmental process. Non-school literacy has traditionally been barred from the classroom. Consequently, the effort to achieve real literacy is crippled from the start for those whose world is different from that of the dominant culture, and whose ideology the classroom seeks to reproduce.

In On Literacy, Robert Pattison reconciles this disjunction between the word and the world, between the cultural literacy of the classroom and the non-school literacy of the student's home milieu, by proffering a "bi-idiomatic approach" to pedagogy--one that emphasizes "colloquial and formal discourse simultaneously" (qtd. in Shor 15). In this context, Rap as a form of non-school literacy, could be used in conjunction with more formal discourse practices instead of as a substitute for them.

Radical Praxis and Gangsta' Rap

What then should be the role of the practitioner in such a radical setting? As posited by several postmodern theorists, the

role of the teacher is as important as it is dynamic. The stakes are far higher than they are in either the transactional or expressivist classroom--as evidenced by the deeply humanitarian goals of the radical pedagogical project. The effects of pedagogy are thus viewed as extending far beyond the narrow confines of the classroom to the society at large, as evinced by the goal of fostering in the student, not merely a measure of functional or career-oriented literacy, but a critical literacy as well. One cannot, however, come to an appreciation of the teacher's role in such a classroom without first examining the goals of such a radical pedagogy in greater detail.

A rap-oriented radical pedagogy seeks first of all to reconstitute as subjects those who have been treated as objects. How does it accomplish this? By grounding literacy in the lived experience of students, such a radical pedagogy not only makes possible success in the classroom, but mitigates the effects of deculturation while equipping students not only with the attributes privileged in the marketplace, but with a critical literacy for analyzing and understanding the dominant power structures, and for effecting meaningful change in those structures. As Robinson observes, it seeks to afford not only "access to the means of acquiring literacy," but the "opportunities for practicing its competencies" (18). Such a pedagogical approach is predicated on a literacy that includes the "ability to participate fully in a set of intellectual and social practices" (35). A literacy that does not bring a measure

of political agency, economic self-determinacy, and social freedom is not true literacy; it's merely literacy in theory, a semi-literacy which reinscribes the unevenly distributed power relations of the status quo. Whereas cultural literacy works to close-off, critical literacy seeks to open up access; whereas cultural literacy is rendered in a top-down fashion, critical literacy employs an interactive approach, seeking to establish a dialectic not only between teacher and student, but between classroom and community.

Non-school and academic literacies are thus not viewed as incompatible discourses at the extremes of a binary opposition, but as the mutually nourishing elements of a continuum in which traffic flows both ways between the public and private sector. An emphasis on critical literacy has advantages for the mainstreamed, as well as for the marginalized student, to the extent that it seeks to teach "students how to unravel, and critically appropriate the codes, vocabularies, and deep grammar of different cultural traditions," as Giroux and McLaren observe. In the last analysis, the goal of such a radical pedagogy is not the mere mastering of skills for economic survival, but the possibility of a more humane existence for those for whom the American Dream has remained just that--an inaccessible dream.

How is the role of the teacher reconfigured by such a radical pedagogy? First of all, such an approach puts more burden on the teacher to become literate with respect to the lived experience of his or her students. To this end, Shirley

Bryce Heath favors ethnographic research as a method for teacher-training. Indeed, if such a radical pedagogy is to ever achieve broad acceptance, it must be included in the teacher-training methodologies that are modeled to aspiring teachers alongside the transactional, expressivist, and eclectic paradigms. Otherwise, it will never escape its narrow confinement in the academy and in academic journals. In this context, prospective teachers would become "ethnographers of their students' communities, researching the literacy and lives in student culture" (Shor 16). Students likewise could be sent out into their own communities to conduct similar research. Ira Shor is quick to perceive the significance of Heath's approach:

> Through such a pedagogy students teach themselves and the teacher, while the teacher learns from the very students she or he is teaching. . . . Heath's program collapsed the wall between classroom and community, between research and teaching, and between research and living. (17)

Heath's view of the teacher's role is shared by Fox, who asserts that such a practitioner "needs to be informed about the social ground from which students write, a knowledge that needs to come from a study of African-American texts, but also through seeing and listening to their own students" (301). Gangsta' Rap lyrics comprise an effective means for informing the teacher of this social ground and for "unveiling their students' realities" (301). This approach posits a dialogic relationship between the

teacher and student--one that is mediated by Rap texts as a means for achieving a measure of critical literacy on the part of both student and teacher. Fox is cognizant of both the difficulties and efficacy of such a cross-cultural exchange:

> Such productive relationships between white faculty members and African-American students are rare and difficult; yet there is no other way than to disclose 'position,' show a willingness to listen and to change, and demonstrate in overt ways . . . a desire to include and legitimate the experiences and language of African Americans. (301)

Situating pedagogy in the community of the learner has the further advantage of demonstrating "that intellectual work has a tangible purpose in our lives, in discourse connected to the students' habits of communication" and "the concrete circumstances of living" (Shor 24). Cornell West similarly observes that "black intellectuals 'lack any organic link with most of Black life' and that this 'diminishes their value to black resistance'" (qtd. in hooks 30). West reconceptualizes the role of the black intellectual, foregrounding it in the ghettoized terrain and lived experiences of African-Americans. Only such a move will reverse "the minimal immediate impact of Black intellectual activity on the black community" and give a "practical dimension to their work" (West 138). West reconfigure the Black intellectual as a "critical organic catalyst . . . linked to the kinetic orality, the rhythmic syncopation, the

protean improvisation, and the religious, rhetorical, and antiphonal elements of Afro-American life" (144). Such a situated scholarship and pedagogy would go a long way toward dispelling the image of the alienated academic.

Shor further delineates the role of the practitioner in the service of a radical pedagogy. He envisions a teacher who becomes the medium for effecting a critical literacy "that invites teachers and students to problematize all subjects of study" (24). He envisions a practitioner whose pedagogy is situated, whose performing skills are dynamic, and whose community awareness is ethnographically sound. Giroux and McLaren also encourage teachers to pursue such a pedagogical course:

> to make popular culture a legitimate object of school knowledge so as to deepen the relationship between schooling and everyday life and to better grasp as a basis for critical analysis the totality of elements that organize student identities, experiences, and cultures. (xxxiv)

What then are some of the specific classroom practices that might be employed in the service of a rap-oriented radical pedagogy? First, the practitioner of argumentative discourse could introduce students to that discourse mode by asking them to develop a position on any of the controversial issues in the debate over Gangsta' Rap--in short, by allowing them to assume the role of arguers, along the lines of the paradigm modeled by Breihan in <u>An Unquiet Pedagogy</u>. To heighten students' critical

awareness, xeroxed copies of articles outlining these issues could be distributed. To stimulate student literacy on the subject, a series of ten-minute free-writing topics grounded in the controversies could be introduced, in which students are encouraged to state their views. This could serve as a pre-debate exercise, after which students on opposite sides of a given issue could be asked to sit on opposite sides of the classroom, as a means of physicalizing opposition, of foregrounding productive conflict.

To further enhance critical literacy on these issues, students could be assigned a more formal written assignment in which they are asked to develop their views, using their journal entries, their classroom conversation, and the xeroxed articles as additional sources. Additionally, they could be dispatched into their home communities to interview people of all ages regarding their feelings about the validity of Gangsta' Rap, recording responses in their field journals. Included among their interview subjects could be one or more rappers who would be questioned not only about their views concerning Gangsta' Rap, but about their composing processes as well.

Students could also be asked to collect all manner of Gangsta' Rap lyrics, which would then be xeroxed and distributed to the class for analysis and discussion, reading their world back into the word. This could be extended to an analysis of home idioms and vernacular, and from Gangsta' Rap to Rap in general. The lyrics gathered and generated could then be

analyzed and discussed with respect to issues of race, class, and gender, of censorship, violence, and empowerment--as could other cultural representations associated with Gangsta' Rap, such as apparel, dance, and video. Overall, Rap texts could be used to interrogate the practices of the dominant culture that have traditionally denied a fuller participation to marginalized students. Finally, the student could be invited to create his or her own rap song as part of an individual or collaborative project--with the additional option of performing it for the class.

Gangsta' Rap as Cultural Contra(band)

Rap can be an effective terrain from which to mount a critical interrogation of the dominant culture. It is afterall a terrain where the word and the world are conjoined, where issues of race, class and gender, of police brutality, misogyny and censorship intersect. Rap reinscribes the struggles, injustices, and oppression of the urban terrain. As bell hooks affirms, rap is at the leading edge of the "radical liberation struggle" (26). Moreover, as praxis, it is consistent with a postmodern sensibility:

> The postmodern sensibility appropriates practices as boasts that announce their own . . . existence, like a rap song boasting of the imaginary (or real--it makes no difference) accomplishments of the rapper. They offer forms of empowerment not only in the face of

> nihilism but precisely through the forms of nihilism itself, a moment of positivity through the production and structuring of affective relations. (27-28)

As a consequence of its illegitimate, marginalized status within this ghettoized terrain, Gangsta' Rap has already evolved a language of criticism, which constitutes a strong foundation for constructing a more critical literacy, as well as radical black subjecthood. Rap texts comprise a potent site from which to mount such a liberatory confrontation. If literacy is a function of relevancy to the world, as Freire's work suggests, then Rap lyrics constitute a potentially effective vehicle for achieving not just functional or professional but critical literacy. Such a radical approach to pedagogy would go a long way to rekindling the faith and re-engaging the interest of students in education. If one is seeking to construct literacy of any kind, does it not make sense to begin with the foundation of non-school literacy already possessed by students, as opposed to starting at ground zero by imposing upon them a literacy grounded solely in the ideology of an alien dominant culture?

There is another reason for using the spoken contexts of Rap as texts in the writing classroom, for they are markers of the evolution to subject position and agency of the most silenced and under-represented group in American society--the young, black, urban male. By using rap lyrics as texts, this segment of our population might gain a measure of radical black subject position

not just as criminals and rappers, but as students, as bell hooks observes:

> It is no accident that 'rap' has usurped the primary position of rhythm and blues music among young black folks as the most desired sound, or that it began as a form of 'testimony' for the underclass. It has enabled underclass black youth to develop a critical voice . . . a common literacy. Rap projects a critical voice, explaining, demanding, urging. (27)

Are we then to silence these "subjugated people," many of whom are "coming into voice for the first time" (28).

Further, Rap enables many young blacks to reconstitute "outmoded notions of identity. We have too long had imposed on us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness" (hooks 28). Rap consequently offers the means by which the urban black male might escape confinement in the "static, overdetermined identity" that has been imposed upon him," even as it opens up "new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency," and for the affirmation of "multiple black identities." As a consequence of its liberatory effect, its oppositional stance, and its reconfiguration of identity, Gangsta' Rap can play a key role in the "struggle for radical black subjectivity" (hooks 28).

Thankfully, that silence is now being transfigured into song, that erasure into visibility, that objectification into subjecthood. These long repressed voices are finally being heard

and deserve to be heard, not just in the ghetto, not just in the Senate, but in the classroom as well. For by hearing such voices we gain a deeper understanding of the conflicted souls from which they arise.

Legitimating these texts in the classroom would facilitate the movement toward true agency and subject position effected by Rap in the world of the student--would expand the boundaries of that agency from the ghetto to the school, by reincarnating the world in the word--a critical move in any campaign to make education meaningful to the marginalized. Further, such lyrics, by enabling rappers and student-listeners to name their world, "offer students distance on reality" (Shor 17). Like all language, rapping helps the speaker to name and, in naming, to dominate his or her world. This is the source of the agency it brings not only to the rappers, but to their audiences. What we are witnessing is the liberatory magnification of the ego to true subject position through language. As Freud's rebellious protege Otto Rank affirms, the aim of language is not merely to "identify with what it imitates, but . . . to dominate it and make itself independent of it" (240). The word thus frees us from the world, gives us a measure of autonomy from it; critical literacy is by definition liberatory. This helps explain the egotistical content, attitudes, and representations of so much Rap music--the felt sense of empowerment and liberation, as expressed not only in the verbal combat of their verses, but in their move-busting dances and hip-hop carnivalesque costumes. All reflect the

liberatory, ego-magnifying effects of language, for the very act of naming the world results in the empowerment of the ego. For those traditionally relegated to positions of powerlessness, this first whiff of empowerment can seem aphrodesial. The power to name the violent liberates the rapper from it--and liberates both rapper and listener from passive objectification into radical subject position.

Rappers have used language to leverage a measure of space from the crushing weight of an oppressive world; they have invented a creative crawl-space, as it were, in which to survive in the conflicted, ghettoized terrain that is their home. And now a new sound is being heard, one that may eventually silence the noise of semi-automatic bursts. It is the sound of the rapper's voice, busting off rounds of in-your-face verse, perhaps inspired by the staccato bursts of gunfire that is so often the counterpoint to their inventions. For too long they have listened to the sound of their own silence. Now the "silencers" have been removed from their mouths. And thus they fight back, as Paule Marshall contends, "using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word" (211).

And yet we should not seek to censure, to silence this form of verbal warfare, but be grateful for it, because it displaces onto an illusory plane the violent impulses that threaten, not only our urban landscape, but the integrity of the American dream itself. The once silenced mouths are now drowning out the overheated barrels of Ak 47s and 357s. And for my money, the

sound of a Gangsta' Rapper spraying the air with violence-inspired verses is far preferable to that of a real-life gangsta' hosing down a neighborhood with hollow-point bullets.

The growing popularity of Rap, moreover, allows us to envision a day when the sound of ghettoized gunfire may give way entirely to that of music, because, as Gangsta' Rap has shown, music can engender the same thing they now get from the barrel of a gun: a sense of empowerment, of agency, of radical black subject position. In using their mouths like guns, rappers may yet succeed not only in drowning out the sound of gunfire, but in making the need for guns obsolete--at least as a means to empowerment. Through their music they have already succeeded in restoring a measure of subjecthood to The Hood.

In the last analysis, we can silence the Gangsta' Rappers, but we do so at our own peril. For by silencing them we will only further heighten the appeal of criminals to young blacks; will only make it easier for the carjacker and the gang banger to conscript youths into illegitimate careers, because for too many black youths those will be the only careers that offer a measure of agency. In silencing the Gangsta' Rapper, we will only pump up the volume of violence. Rap music, even Gangsta' Rap, has a humanizing effect on its practitioners. And in a terrain that has become dehumanized in so many ways, a little humanity may go a long way. Finally, by including such social contexts as texts in the classroom, the debilitating process of deculturation with its subsequent loss of identity might be reversed. Under these

circumstances students might come to believe that schooling does not constitute the negation of all they cherish as human beings--their home, their vernacular, and their very sense of self. Such a move would enable them to "speak from their own histories and traditions while simultaneously challenging the very grounds of knowledge and power that work to silence them" (Giroux and McLaren xxiv).

By continuing to exclude their non-school literacy from the classroom we widen the gap between the world and the word. We exclude tomorrow's citizens from participation in the democratic process to the peril of that very process. If what students learn in the classroom is not relevant to their world, cannot help them escape from it or bring about a measure of power, agency, and subject position, then what is the reason for seeking an education in the first place? And what is the value of literacy in such a context? What is the reward, as Ogbu asks, for investing the time, for risking the loss of cultural identity?

On the other hand, creating room in the classroom for what Pattison characterizes as the "vital literacy" and the lived experiences of the student has the potential to reverse the ominous and sad flow of disenfranchised students away from the classroom and the academy--a route which ends for too many in the even narrower confines of a jail cell, whose zero-agency may speak eloquently as a metaphor for the conflicted terrain of the ghetto at large (205).

We as practitioners, researchers, theorists, and administrators need to reverse this flow so that the mainstream might once again be enriched by the multiple, diverse tributaries whose contributions have been reduced to a trickle in the name of cultural hegemony. A river in the last analysis is only as healthy as the tributaries that feed it. We divert, dam, and destroy those flows at the risk of our well-being as a society; and by diverting them into unnatural channels risk the death of the river itself--in the broad, sun-baked expanse of cultural sameness.

We need to open wide the valves that have been shut off, to restore the flow of the living world to the dead word, to make sure that the word is incarnate not only in the texts of the dominant culture, but in the (con)texts of those that constitute its subculture. On the currents of this lived literacy, on this "still-forming literacy of popular vigor," the students will return (201)--if they know that upon reaching the alien, conflicted borders of the classroom they will be welcomed instead of tolerated, listened to instead of silenced, and empowered instead of decultured; if upon crossing that threshold they are permitted to bring with them their vernacular, their non-school literacies, and their sense of self. Such a radical revitalization is long overdue.

We need to do away with the pedagogical barriers that have barred the community from the classroom, divested the world from the word. We need to transform the classroom from an isolated

study-hall into an open marketplace for critical exchange. Otherwise, the classroom will suffer the same fate as the frogs that are being silenced worldwide as a consequence of environmental contaminants--because their membranes have lost the ability to exchange vital compounds with the air that encompasses them. The stakes are indeed high; but so are the potential rewards, as Pattison so eloquently states:

> the resulting mongrel product will be a literacy effective enough to serve the needs of social organization and technological development but sensible enough to maintain rapport with the vitality of spoken language and the need of the population for a sublime sense of language. (206)

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